

AN EXPRESSIONIST VIEW OF HUMANKIND AND NATURE

by

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A THESIS

submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

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Major Professor

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The experience of studying and developing my art in Kansas has been enriching. The art I have produced is evidence of a continuing progression that I grasped when arriving here two years ago.

As my major professor, Duane Noblett truly deserves my whole-hearted recognition. His direction and advice has played a major role in the confidence and evolution conveyed in my paintings. I also have much appreciation for my graduate committee members, Gary Woodward, Jim Swiler, and Dr. Lou Ann Culley, who all contributed to my education. The enlightenment, on my part, of numerous art topics and issues I owe to Professor Charles Stroh, who never ceases to amaze me with a wealth of knowledge.

The perseverance I found to pursue this degree stems from the support of my dear friends and parents; with them, my art and spirit soar.

Introduction

At the turn of this century, a movement developed which was concerned with the visual projection of emotional experiences. The movement was called German Expressionism. German Expressionist artists were driven to express their unresolved conflicts with society and their personal anxieties. Peter Selz, in his book German Expressionist Painting, states: "The expressionist movement may be seen in part as a reaction against the prevailing values of the deceptively stable society in which the artists grew up. In their reaction against materialism and nationalism they were attempting to affirm the values of the spiritual."¹

From my exposure to Expressionist paintings in museums and my ongoing research, I developed an empathy with one artist in particular. Franz Marc (1880-1916), through his philosophy and practice of art, strove to intensify his feelings for the organic flow between nature and animals. Marc's personal color symbolism and subject matter has emerged in my mind's eye as an analog to my interests in animal mythology.

Marc's philosophy sparked my awareness of humankind's delicate relationship with nature. The many years I spent in rural Virginia among the mountains, tall green trees, expanses of pastureland, and the ocean has nurtured in me an appreciation and love for nature and its inhabitants. Virginia has always presented me with a sense of enclosure and security which pervades my thoughts when I consider the landscape.

In this written segment of my M.F.A. thesis, I will strive to interpret my art by acknowledging major influences and revealing personal philosophies.

Franz Marc

When Franz Marc was born in 1880, German art was embroiled in a kind of discontent. Franz von Lenbach was known as the painter prince of Munich at that time, for he painted in the tradition of the Munich Academy which had regulated the art climate of Germany for centuries. For the most part, Lenbach's paintings were naturalistic. A growing dissatisfaction with this art style, however, derived from the idea that it was pretentious and degrading to German values. An opposite pole gradually grew out of this discontent. The "Munich Secession," a group of independent painters, broke ties with the academy.

This break with tradition led to the formation of other movements including Jugendstil which followed the Secession around 1900. Jugendstil was revolutionary in its emphasis on spiritualization and directing art inward toward the mind and soul of the artist.

The distinguishing factor that set the modern art of Germany apart from the previous 500 years was that the mere portrayal of existing objects and contents was replaced by the creation of pure forms which, objective or not, are emotionally expressive.

The Blue Rider (Bläue Reiter) developed following the overthrow of the academic school and was crucial to the German Expressionist movement. Franz Marc and Wassily Kandinsky, a Russian painter, organized two exhibitions and edited an almanac that emphasized:

The shifting of the center of gravity in Art,
Literature and Music
The diversity of forms, considered from the point of
view of construction and composition
The necessity of understanding interior Nature and, in
consequence, of renouncing any embellishment of
Nature's forms ...such, in general, are the
manifestations of the interior Renaissance
To demonstrate the character and the manifestations of
the transformation and show the continuity which
links this tendency with the past
To bring forth the impulses hidden in forms which stir
a personal reaction in the spectator
...These are the objectives The Blue Rider sets
itself.²

Marc, in developing a personal analogy which linked animals and humanity, employed color as an emotional element in his paintings. He embraced the belief that radiant color had expressive power. Marc was entranced by the fiery and exuberant qualities of pure hue. His discovery of color harmonies for his animal forms can be seen in three important paintings by Marc, in 1911, Three Red Horses, Blue Horse I, and Yellow Cow.



FRANZ MARC The Yellow Cow 1911 The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

Yellow Cow shows a large cow bounding through a landscape. Its color is a defiant yellow with two large blue markings. The surrounding countryside becomes highly stylized: trees are poles, hills are bumps and the earth is blue and orange, purple and yellow. The animal and landscape correspond in rhythm and form. It was necessary that color in painting be liberated from the world of appearances and that it achieve, by itself, the strongest emotional effect.

Color and Subject Matter

I share this view and, like Marc, devised a definite color harmony for my art. I view color as the principle element that compels the viewer to observe and reflect upon the images. In the oil on canvas Advice (1987), combinations of contrasting complementary colors are juxtaposed and bands of pure color which trace the outlines of shapes are intended to glow and vibrate. The luminosity of color can overwhelm the viewer and thus deepen the expressive content of the painting.

By applying subjective color that radiates from the figures and their environment, the naturalistic confines are torn away. I use subjective color in animals and nature in order to demonstrate my feeling of identification with nature. Hue and shape repetition instills a rhythm within animals and environment alike. Marc wrote, "Each animal is the embodiment of a cosmic rhythm."³

I have been exploring a primitivist notion of the reciprocity of man and nature and have found the ideas of Jean-Jacques Rousseau to be of interest. Rousseau believed that the further human beings are separated from the state of nature, the further they are separated

from their true essence. He thought that contemporary socialized humans are dependent creatures living in a world of externals. Rousseau made comparisons between animals and man: "the stallion pawing at the earth and instinctively resisting any attempt to reign or control it; the man of civilization was a trained horse unruffled by the crack of the whip or the bit of spur."⁴

Rousseau proclaimed that humankind had suffered in the evolutionary process and could never really know the essence of nature until they succumbed to its basic continuity. In this way Rousseau challenged the direction that civilization had taken.

Like Rousseau, Marc did not see nature as a chaotic power to be tamed, but as a living dynamic force that enveloped the spirits of the creatures inhabiting it. His response to these philosophies was instilled in his art forms. I agree that art should embody the flow of the natural life process. Through color and subject matter, I seek to capture the spirit of nature with humans existing in a balance with nature.

My research involving the annihilation of the wolf in most of the United States introduced me to man's inhumanity. The anguish I felt when learning of the plight of the wolves emphasized the separation of modern humanity and nature. This trait born of insecurity and greed stands between them. Familiarity breeds respect. It is my intention to provide a picture for people that conveys the potential and insight of familiarity between humans and nature.

I paint what is familiar to me--nature and animals in the landscape. The interaction between humans and animals creates endless

possibilities for depiction. My imagery has evolved from representing wolves realistically in the landscape to highly stylized shapes that suggest the roles of humans and nature. I utilize a body language that emphasizes a statement. Generalizing humans and wolves has helped me to reduce the narrative meanings conjured up by the subjects. The paintings transcend narrative portrayals and become exclamations of nature's complexity and mystery.

The inhabitants run, investigate and even mourn within a colorfully compact and crowded environment. In Catching Spirits (1987), there is a strongly vertical format that is stressed by the large hanging corpses of wolves. This serves as emphasis for the painting. A human being leans into view from the bottom-side in order to hold a massive container under the hanging bodies. Near the top, another wolf strains his head up in an effort to howl. The participants are surrounded by shapes of various hues that reduce the sense of depth severely. This reinforces the cohesive relationship that exists between them.

In order to compliment my impatient style of painting, I primarily work on paper. Through the application of gesso on paper, I can paint very quickly in contrast to building stretched canvases. After establishing a charcoal drawing, I apply thick oil pigment with a palette knife. By applying the paint thickly, the surfaces have a density and a gleam of their own.

A question involving the size of my works challenged me to experiment on a larger scale. I feel a sense of ease and comfort exists when working on small surfaces. Though the large surfaces tend to take longer to complete, the result of expanding the surfaces

gives me more room for composition and emphasis. When confronted with large scale paintings, the viewer must confront the work as much with their bodies as they do with their eyes and therefore participate more fully in the interaction of color and subject matter. The paintings Advice, Overflow, and Catching Spirits (1987) all are 5 feet or more in dimensions and are on canvas.

Conclusions

I readily acknowledge that, in terms of content and technique, I draw upon a wide variety of art-historical sources; in this regard, I follow the tradition of learning from early masters as I experiment with various compositional devices as well as different approaches to the rendering of surfaces and exploring the ways in which a range of emotions might be conveyed through my choice of subject matter. My paintings have strong ties to Expressionism and to the modern world of art. By reflecting upon Franz Marc's philosophies and practice of art, I can instill the power of nature's life flow in my work. Marc wrote in the magazine Pan in 1912:

Do people seriously believe that we new artists do not take our form from nature, do we not wrest it from nature, just like every artist that has ever lived? ...Nature glows in our paintings as it does in all art....Nature is everywhere, in us and outside us; but there is something which is not quite nature but rather mastery and interpretation of nature: art. In its essence, art has always been the boldest removal from nature and 'naturalness.' The bridge across to the realm of the spirit, the necromancy of humanity.⁵

Art has always interacted with the social environment; it is never neutral. Suzi Gablik, in the book Has Modernism Failed?, explains

that art "...may either reflect, reinforce, transform, or repudiate, but it is always in some kind of necessary relation to the social structure. There's always a correlation between society's values, directions, and motives and the art it produces."⁶ This continuity is portrayed in my paintings and can be traced to traditions long held in the art world.

Contemporary art seems to be taking a deliberate look back at recent modern masters. Neo-Expressionism has become dominant both here in the United States and abroad. Craving perhaps to return to states of effortless innocence, ignorance, and unconsciousness, Neo-Expressionism implies a kind of primitivism. My paintings reflect these contemporary attitudes. The desire for a return to innocence and nature is a by-product of its loss. Any attempt to recapture lost values of the past suffers from omissions, inconsistencies and voids involving historical events. But these unintentional deletions benefit art creatively. Art becomes traditional and progressive at the same time.

Earlier in this writing, I declared my intention to paint a picture for people that conveys the potential and insight of familiarity between humankind and nature. I want to express the basic vitality that is inherent in nature. Through an optimistic type of primitivism, I place humans and animals in harmony.

The interpretation of my paintings depends upon the individual's point of view--in that each painting represents events that can appeal to us or concern us. These events that invoke humanity within the nurturers and destroyers of life in this world become the focus of

my art which addresses the large issue of humans living in nature and the harmony that could exist.

INDEX OF THESIS ART OBJECTS

<u>Title</u>	<u>Media</u>	<u>Size</u>	<u>Date</u>
1. Wolf Music	Oil on Paper	20" x 24"	1986
2. Aesop Lied	Oil on Paper	24" x 24"	1986
3. Devour the Sun	Oil on Paper	18" x 24"	1986
4. Night Dance	Oil on Paper	20" x 24"	1986
5. On the Stream	Oil/Watercolor on Paper	12" x 16"	1986
6. Day Dream	Oil on Paper	12" x 16"	1986
7. Blue Day	Oil on Paper	12" x 16"	1986
8. Advice	Oil on Canvas	4' x 5'	1987
9. Overflow	Oil on Canvas	5' x 5'	1987
10. Catching Spirits	Oil on Canvas	44" x 68"	1987
11. Dream Says	Oil on Canvas	34" x 44"	1987
12. When I See You Again	Oil on Canvas	40" x 46"	1987

FOOTNOTES

¹Peter Selz, German Expressionist Painting (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957) p. vii.

²Will Grohmann, "The Blue Rider," The Selective Eye, vol. 2, 1956, pp. 31-32.

³Franz Marc quoted in Selz, op. cit., p. 203.

⁴Rousseau quoted in Roger Masters, ed., The First and Second Discourses (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1964) p. 20.

⁵Wolf-Dieter Dube, The Expressionists (London: Thames and Hudson, Ltd., 1972) p. 132.

⁶Suzi Gablik, Has Modernism Failed? (New York: Thames and Hudson, Inc., 1984) p. 51.

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CANDIDATE'S PROGRAM OF STUDY

Master of Fine Arts

<u>Department</u>	<u>Course Number</u>	<u>Course Name</u>	<u>Credit</u>
Art	650	Painting	3
Art	845	Graduate Painting Studies	27
Art	600	Advanced Drawing	3
Art	835	Graduate Drawing Studies	6
Art	635	Printmaking 2	3
Art	685	Print Workshop	1
Art	642	19th Century Art History	3
Art	695	Topics in Art History	3
Art	602	Art Since 1950	3
Art	685	Watercolor and Paper Making	2
Art	825	Seminar in Art	4
Art	899	MFA Research	3
Anthropology	515	Creativity and Culture	<u>3</u>
		Total Credits	64

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AN ABSTRACT OF A THESIS

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Franz Marc, in a letter to the German publisher Reinhard Piper, explained his fascination with the portrayal of animals in nature; he wrote, "I try to intensify my sensitivity for the organic rhythm of all things; I seek pantheist empathy with the vibration and flow of the blood of nature--in the trees, in the animals, in the air...."¹ Marc, along with many other German artists at the turn of this century, introduced an expressionist style to art, which at its roots, emphasized the visual projection of emotional experiences. It is with Franz Marc's art and philosophies that I feel a particular empathy.

My personal interpretation of the relationship between humans and nature acknowledges both Marc and my upbringing. This thesis examines my art by citing major influences and personal philosophies.

Through the use of color and subject matter, I seek to externalize my conviction that the harmony developed between humans and nature would be beneficial to all. My art presents a vision of a close relationship aligning nature and all its inhabitants. This "primitivistic expressionism" I portray combines with a sense of time, place and purpose in history.

¹Franz Marc quoted in Peter Selz, German Expressionist Painting. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957) pp. 200-201.